



DISRAELI'S JEWISHNESS RECONSIDERED

In an effort to demonstrate Jewish contributions to western civilization, communal spokesmen and apologists compile lists of notable Jews whose work has enriched humankind's material and spiritual condition. Among those who appear regularly on such lists are Jews who were totally indifferent to Judaism, as well as Jews who abandoned Judaism altogether—frequently in order to achieve the prominence for which they are today celebrated. These lists, with their Felix Mendelssohns, David Ricardos, Karl Marxes, Boris Pasternaks, and Heinrich Heines, illustrate a persistent weakness on the part of Jews to claim as their “own” prominent artists and savants of Jewish birth, regardless of their later relationship to Judaism and Jewry.

A potent example of this Jewish fascination with former but famous Jews is the case of Benjamin Disraeli (1804–1881), the great Tory politician of Victorian England, long an object of pride and admiration, not only within Anglo-Jewry, but elsewhere as well. Indeed, even Jewish nationalists, who as a matter of course denounced apostates as cowards and traitors, claimed Disraeli as one of their own, naming a street in his honor in one of the more pleasant neighborhoods of Jerusalem. There cannot be many other *meshumadim* (apostates), if any, who have been similarly memorialized.

Although Disraeli was baptized into the Church of England at age thirteen and spent most of his adult life in the company of non-Jews, he was unable, for reasons to be discussed later, to forget his origins and merge contentedly into the mainstream of English national life. In his fiction and public utterances, Jews and the Jewish Question appear with surprising frequency—to the extent that it would not be an exaggeration to say that Disraeli was obsessed with his Jewishness. What he wrote about Jewish matters, however, was not especially intelligent; more often it was silly, ill-informed, and even a little insulting. Still, his intention was to defend and praise the Jewish people, not to damn them, as so many former Jews were wont to do. Despite his conversion, he always expressed an exaggerated pride in his ancestry, and it is in this role, as the successful convert, unashamed of his origins, willing to defend his former coreligionists, that Jews most often honor him.

In recent years a number of historians have reconsidered the exact nature of Disraeli's sense of identification with Judaism, questioning the popular image celebrated by those Jewish list-makers and apologists alluded to before. As their work has not received much recognition outside a small group of scholars and has certainly not yet dislodged the popular image of Disraeli, I would like to reopen the question of this notable Victorian's Jewish identity in the light of recent research, and, in doing so, to offer the suggestion that Disraeli's attitude toward Judaism was far more hostile than commonly believed.

To understand the genesis of Benjamin Disraeli's peculiar views on Jewish matters, we must begin with the very commonplace views of his father, Isaac D'Israeli (1796-1848), a successful but minor literary figure in his time, known primarily as the author of anthologies of literary anecdotes. (The family name was originally Israeli; Isaac's father, also called Benjamin [1730-1816], a prosperous stockbroker, changed it to D'Israeli; early in life Benjamin the younger changed the spelling once again.) Like many Sephardim in western Europe who had embraced European culture, Isaac was distant from—and ignorant of—traditional Jewish practice. Although a member of the Sephardi congregation in Bevis Marks until 1817, when he resigned over a financial dispute, his ties to the community were largely nominal, not much more than a token allegiance, maintained perhaps out of respect for his father. (His resignation came a year after his father's death.) He did not attend synagogue, observe Jewish rituals, or move in Jewish circles.

Isaac is sometimes described as a follower of Voltaire, indifferent to all religions, content to live outside any formal denominational structure. For example, Benjamin Jaffe, in the most recent volume of the *Transactions of the Jewish Historical Society of England*, writes that Isaac, "as an enlightened intellectual influenced by Voltaire's writings, . . . looked on Judaism as just another curiosity of life and literature."¹ Isaiah Berlin, in a brilliant essay on the uses to which Marx and Disraeli put their Jewish identity, describes Isaac as "remote from any kind of passionate belief . . . something of an eighteenth-century deist, neither particularly pleased nor displeased at being born a Jew."²

These assessments, while correct in identifying Isaac as a strict rationalist in religious matters, err in picturing him as somehow disinterested in or indifferent to Jewish practices and beliefs—which, in fact, he was not. Isaac held very strong views about Judaism, mostly critical, and gave vent to them publicly in his work.³ In his view, Judaism had preserved and cherished the prejudices of earlier, barbarous eras. The Talmud was a mass of superstitions, contradictory opinions, rambling oriental fancies, and casuistical glosses. The rabbis of old were dictators of the human intellect who tricked the Jews into accepting their decisions as divine law, thereby casting them into a bondage of ridiculous customs.

Kashrut was the heaviest curse of all, for it estranged the Jews from sympathetic fellowship with other members of the human race, and, along with other particularistic customs, contributed to Christian hatred of the Jews.

These are not dispassionate views. In tenor, they closely resemble the critique of traditional Judaism espoused by the radical *maskilim* in Germany, who were Isaac's exact contemporaries. Benjamin imbibed these views from childhood. As he later wrote to Sarah Brydges Willyams, herself of Jewish origin, "I, like you, was not bred among my race, and was nurtured in great prejudice against them."⁴ In one of his earliest novels, *The Wondrous Tale of Alroy* (1833), an oriental adventure inspired by the twelfth-century false messiah David Alroy, which he wrote in his father's house at Bradenham, some of Isaac's contempt for traditional Judaism is discernible. For example, after recording Alroy's entry into Jerusalem, Disraeli gratuitously inserts a farcical encounter between Alroy and two learned talmudists in which he mocks the nature of rabbinic fables and legends.⁵ Later in life Benjamin appeared to have shed these exaggerated prejudices, for when he returned to Jewish themes in *Coningsby* (1844) and *Tancred* (1847), novels from his Young England period, he no longer focussed on the decadence of traditional Jewry but on the virtues of the Jewish race. Still, it is doubtful whether he ever completely outgrew his youthful contempt for traditional customs and values.

The young Disraeli was exceedingly ambitious, desperately eager to make his mark in fashionable society and national politics. As a Jew in early Victorian England, of course, he would have found such advancement impossible, however nominal his Judaism, but as a convert he faced no legal barriers to a parliamentary career. Moreover, acceptance into fashionable society was also a real possibility. As a young man about town, he assiduously cultivated hostesses and companions from the land-owning elite, while avoiding contact, it appears, with members of the Jewish community. (His intimate friendship with the Rothschild family only began to develop in the late-1840s, that is, after his career was already well launched.) He knew that his Jewish ancestry was a liability. During the five election campaigns he fought between 1832 and 1837, when he finally won a seat in Parliament, his ancestry was an object of ridicule. On one occasion, when he faced the voters of Maidstone, he was greeted with cries of "Shylock!" and "Old Clothes!" Not surprisingly, then, he tried to play down his Jewish origins in the 1830s. For more than a decade after *Alroy*, he did not take up any Jewish themes in his fiction.

Determined to maintain a low Jewish profile during these years, Disraeli carefully avoided any identification with the issue of Jewish emancipation, which agitated the political scene at the time. Abraham Gilam emphasizes this point in his recent work on Disraeli, offering

much evidence that his reputation as a steadfast champion of Jewish interests is undeserved.⁶ For example, almost immediately after taking his seat in the Commons, the question of the admission of Jews to Parliament came up for a vote. The new member voted with the majority against the bill, thereby self-consciously asserting his distance from the Jewish community. He wrote to his sister Sarah after the division, "Nobody looked at me and I was not at all uncomfortable, but voted in the majority (only of 12) with the utmost sangfroid."⁷ During the 1841 debate over the bill to enable Jews to hold municipal offices, he was silent, although the bill passed its three readings without difficulty. He also remained silent in 1845 when his own party sponsored and successfully guided through the Commons another emancipation bill. Perhaps the most compelling evidence of his distance from the issue is that not once during the entire campaign for political equality (1830-1858) did the Anglo-Jewish leadership turn to him to enlist his support. Even after he spoke publicly in favor of Jewish emancipation—in 1847—his friends the Rothschilds did not really believe in the firmness of his commitment. They recognized that political aspirations, not political principles, determined his behavior in the House of Commons.⁸

Yet, somewhat surprisingly, in the mid-1840s he again took up Jewish themes in his writing. In *Coningsby* (1844), one of the first political novels to appear in England, he introduced the mysterious Jewish banker Sidonia—cultivated, cosmopolitan, thoughtful yet wise in the ways of the world, able to decisively influence political events by a word or two to ministers and princes.⁹ From a literary standpoint, Sidonia is superfluous to the development of the novel. He is there largely to act as spokesman for Disraeli's own idiosyncratic views about Jews. He proudly informs the aspiring politician Coningsby that the Jews are a powerful race, masters of the money markets of the world, intellectual arbiters of European thought and sensibility, lords of secret diplomacy and explosive revolution. Their dominance, he explains, derives from their racial purity, their refusal to intermarry with the nations of the world. In Disraeli's words, "the Hebrew is an unmixed race," and "an unmixed race of a first-rate organisation are the aristocracy of Nature."¹⁰ Everywhere Sidonia looks, he sees Jewish power and influence. He tells Coningsby, "There is not a company of singers, not an orchestra in a single capital, that is not crowded with our children under the feigned names which they adopt to conciliate the dark aversion which your posterity will some day disclaim with shame and disgust. Almost every great composer, skilled musician, almost every voice that ravishes you with its transporting strains, springs from our tribes."¹¹

Sidonia also sets forth an unorthodox case for emancipation.¹² Eschewing what he calls "political sentimentalism" (that is, the liberal argument for the toleration of diverse religious views), he argues that as the

Jews are allowed to accumulate property, which is the basis of power, they have become a powerful class and should be incorporated into the political nation rather than forced into permanent opposition to the established order. The Tory refusal to grant them emancipation has temporarily pushed them into the ranks of levellers and latitudinarians. "The Tories lose an important election at a critical moment; 'tis the Jews come forward to vote against them." Every generation they will become more powerful, due to their racial purity and their accumulation of property, and thus more dangerous to the Establishment. "It is a physiological fact; a simple law of nature. . . . No penal laws, no physical tortures, can effect that a superior race should be absorbed in an inferior, or be destroyed by it. The mixed persecuting races disappear; the pure persecuted race remains." Yet, Sidonia explains, the Jews are at heart Tories, essentially monarchical, deeply religious, and thus through political emancipation could be brought into the ranks of conservatism, where by nature they belong.

There was one further reason, Disraeli argued, that England should bestow emancipation on the Jews, and that was out of gratitude for their fundamental contributions to culture. Europe owed to the Jews "the best part of its laws, a fine portion of its literature, all its religion." Boastfully Sidonia asks Coningsby, "What are all the schoolmen, Aquinas himself, to Maimonides? And as for modern philosophy, all springs from Spinoza." Needless to say, arguments such as these did not win Disraeli friends in any political camp.

Three years later, in *Tancred*, a romantic tale of a young English lord's quest for spiritual meaning in the Holy Land, Disraeli again harped on Christian civilization's indebtedness to the Jews. On a pilgrimage to Mount Sinai, Tancred asks himself why he, "the child of a northern isle," has come to this "great and terrible wilderness," and what his connection is with it. The answer, he decides, is that he has a right to be there, he has a connection with this region, it has a hold upon him: ". . . words had been uttered and things done, more than thirty centuries ago, in this stony wilderness, which influenced his opinions and regulated his conduct every day of his life, in that distant and seagirt home. . . ." The life and property of Englishmen were protected by "the laws of Sinai;" its working people guaranteed a day of rest in every seven by these same laws of sublime benevolence. The most popular poet in England was not Wordsworth or Byron but "the sweet singer of Israel." The heroic history of ancient Israel animated its people in their pursuit of liberty. Above all, the English were indebted to the Jews for knowledge of the true God and for the means by which they might be redeemed from their sins—i.e., Jesus of Nazareth.¹³

In *Tancred*, Disraeli also confronted—and vigorously denied—the accusation of perpetual Jewish responsibility for the death of Jesus. Most

of what he wrote in refutation of this ancient indictment was unoriginal and need not detain us. But one of his arguments in defense of the innocence of the Jews was so startlingly novel that it does require comment. Disraeli did not deny that some Jews in first-century Jerusalem put Jesus to death. However, he felt that Christians should honor rather than damn them for this deed, since without the sacrifice of Jesus the gentile world would have been denied redemption. Jesus's death having been preordained by the Creator since the beginning of time, the Jews were simply carrying out one more divinely appointed task. "Where then was the inexpiable crime of those who fulfilled the beneficent intention? The holy race supplied the victim and the immolators. What other race could have been entrusted with such a consummation?"¹⁴

Tancred appeared in March 1847. In December of that year, Disraeli spoke in the House of Commons for the first, and only, time on the question of Jewish emancipation. While he did not repeat the claim that Christians should be grateful to Jews for their role in Jesus's execution, he did reiterate his other unorthodox arguments in favor of admitting them to Parliament. He claimed to speak not as a defender of religious toleration but as a Christian who would not take upon himself "the awful responsibility of excluding from the Legislature those who are of the religion of which my Lord and Saviour was born. . . ." He urged the Commons to admit Jewish members because of the affinity between Judaism and Christianity and because of the latter's debt to the former. "Where is your Christianity," he asked, "if you do not believe in their Judaism?"¹⁵ Disraeli was interrupted repeatedly throughout the speech and when he sat down was greeted by silence from both sides of the house.

This reception did not prevent Disraeli from continuing to air his views on Judaism and Christianity. In 1851, he published a biography of Lord George Bentinck, a political ally who had died suddenly in 1848, in which he inserted a chapter on Judaism and the Jews that was unrelated to the subject of the biography. Here he repeated in a more systematic way than on previous occasions his views on Jewish responsibility for Jesus's death, the admission of Jews to Parliament, and the indestructibility of the Jewish people. As before, his praise for the Jews was exaggerated and chauvinistic: "We hesitate not to say that there is no race at this present . . . period that so much delights, and fascinates, and elevates, and ennobles Europe, as the Jewish."¹⁶

Disraeli's bold embrace of his Jewish origins in the 1840s was a startling about-face for a convert on the verge of achieving national political prominence. How can we understand this extraordinary behavior?

Among recent attempts to explain Disraeli's return to Jewishness one of the least satisfactory is the Zionist interpretation. According to this account, as argued by Benjamin Jaffe,¹⁷ for example, *Alroy* and *Tancred* express Disraeli's opposition to assimilation and his belief in the restora-

tion of the Jews to the Land of Israel. The evidence for the first of these two claims is slim. There is one passage in *Tancred* (which, in fact, Jaffe does not cite) where Disraeli mocks the cultural pretensions of the westernized daughters of a wealthy Jewish merchant at Damascus. These young women are ashamed of their race, not devoted to their religion, and eager to pass through society without being discovered as Jews.¹⁸ Here, it seems to me, Disraeli is not so much attacking assimilation (that is, total immersion in Christian society) as the dishonorable behavior of Jews who try to merge into the majority without acknowledging the stock from which they come. On no other occasion, as far as I know, did Disraeli attack assimilation. Indeed, far from being an enemy of assimilation, he was a warm supporter of its most thoroughgoing variety: conversion to Christianity.

Historians who describe Disraeli as a proud Jew almost always ignore, or are ignorant of, the fact that he was a believing Christian. Despite the unorthodoxy of his views about the Jewish people, in matters of fundamental Christian belief his thinking was quite conventional. For Disraeli, Jesus was the Christ, "blending in his inexplicable nature the divine essence with the human elements, a sacrificial mediator," whose "atoning blood" would purify "the myriads that had preceded and the myriads that will follow him." Judaism, in order to complete itself, had to assimilate Christianity. It was deplorable that "several millions of the Jewish race should persist in believing in only a part of their religion," but understandable, since it had been presented to them in a debased form (Roman Catholicism) by peoples who persecuted and tormented them. Now, however, with the Christian nations becoming more humane in their treatment of the Jews and with the latter having the opportunity to ponder over true Christianity, very different results could be expected.¹⁹ These are hardly the views of an enemy of assimilation.

Was, then, Disraeli a proto-Zionist? This question is not as easily answered as the previous one. If Disraeli believed that Sinai was incomplete without Calvary (as he frequently stated), how could he also believe that one day the Jews would return to their land and there reestablish their own national life, independent of Christianity? Christian supersessionism and Jewish nationalism are not easily reconciled. The few evangelical Christians who urged the restoration of the Jews saw the restoration not as an end in itself but as a prelude to Jewish conversion at the time of the Second Coming. Did Disraeli share their outlook? I doubt it. He was not a millenarian, nor did he have anything to say about the Second Coming. Yet there is evidence that the idea of the return to Zion crossed his mind more than once. In *Alroy*, he wrote sympathetically about Jews struggling for political sovereignty, while in *Tancred*, most of which is set in the Holy Land, he described the unique spiritual qualities of life there. In fact, in the latter novel, while describing a Sukkot celebra-

tion in Lebanon, he explicitly declared that "a race that persist in celebrating their vintage, although they have no fruits to gather, will regain their vineyards."²⁰ Jaffe also points out that Disraeli spoke to Lord Derby in 1851 in all seriousness about returning the Jews to their land, and, in addition, encouraged Laurence Oliphant before he set out for Syria and Palestine in 1879 to explore the possibility of establishing a Jewish colony there.²¹ This evidence, however, cannot sustain a Zionist reading of Disraeli's espousal of his Jewishness from the 1840s on. It is too episodic, for one thing, and, furthermore, cannot explain why he returned to Jewish themes at the time he did. He may have toyed with the idea of the restoration of the Jews on occasion, but it was not a central feature of his thinking about Jewish matters in the way that his racial views were.

An even less satisfactory approach to Disraeli's Jewishness comes in M. C. N. Salbstein's recent study of the emancipation of Anglo-Jewry.²² Salbstein believes that the key to Disraeli's sense of Jewishness is his "Marrano mentality," by which he means that Disraeli wore the mask of an Englishman while remaining in his heart of hearts a Jew. How this notion extends our understanding of Disraeli's acknowledgement of his Jewishness is difficult to know. The Marranos, it should be remembered, hid their ties to Judaism from the eyes of the public; to do otherwise was to court disaster. Disraeli, on the other hand, publicly paraded his Jewish ancestry, converting it into a virtue. The Marrano metaphor is also inappropriate because Disraeli was not himself the descendant of Marranos. His ancestors were Italian Jews, with no connection, as far as we know, with the Iberian peninsula. His father and grandfather belonged to the Spanish and Portuguese congregation, like other Italian Jews in London, but they were not, strictly speaking, Sephardim. There was no tradition in their family background of ancestors involuntarily donning Christian masks to survive in Gentile society. Thus, it is misleading to describe this fully anglicized descendant of Italian Jews as a "Marrano Englishman."²³

More fruitful in understanding Disraeli's peculiar sense of Jewishness is the suggestion, first made by Hannah Arendt over thirty years ago, that his proclamation of the racial superiority of the Jews was a strategy to combat his feelings of social inferiority.²⁴ Arendt argued that Disraeli, being acutely sensitive to his status as an outsider within both the Tory party and fashionable society, compensated for his parvenu Jewish origins by inventing a myth of Jewish racial chosenness. In other words, he countered the caste pride of the well-born landowners of ancient lineage by whom he wished to be accepted with his own sense of racial pride. According to his racial hierarchy, the English aristocracy was "sprung from a horde of Baltic pirates, who never were heard of during the greater annals of the world," while the Jews, on the other hand, were God's chosen people, with whom alone He had communicated. Indeed, God had never spoken to a European, or, as Tancred unhappily realizes,

"there is a qualification of blood as well as of locality necessary for this communion [with God] . . . the favoured votary must not only kneel in the Holy Land but be of the holy race."²⁵ Racial doctrines such as these enabled Disraeli to feel himself an aristocrat; like the great Tory magnates, he was chosen to lead merely by virtue of his birth, by virtue of his membership in a great race.

Arendt also saw that the essence of Disraeli's Jewishness was racial chauvinism and that, except for this, his Jewishness had no other content. The Jewish characters in his novels do not live Jewish lives—i.e., they do not observe Jewish customs, express authentic Jewish concerns, or do anything recognizably different from his other characters, except give vent to their racial pride. Sidonia will not marry a non-Jew, Disraeli tells us, because he is as devoted to his race as other persons are to their religion: "No earthly consideration would ever induce him to impair that purity of race on which he prides himself."²⁶ Judaism as a living body of beliefs, customs, and ethics is conspicuously absent in his writing. Perhaps, like his father, he believed that it had ceased to be a vital source of inspiration and meaning for modern societies. Lady Battersea (née Constance de Rothschild), who knew Disraeli well, captured the essence of his Jewishness when she wrote to her husband just after Disraeli's death in 1881, "His racial instincts were his religion and he was true to that religion until he drew his last breath."²⁷

Arendt's suggestion that racial chauvinism constituted the essence of Disraeli's Jewishness also clarifies another idiosyncrasy in his thinking on Jewish matters (although she, in fact, seemed not to have been aware of it). Readers of *Coningsby* and *Tancred* cannot fail to notice the author's habit of blurring theological and historical differences between Judaism and Christianity. Tancred, for example, asks Eva, the beautiful daughter of a wealthy Jewish merchant of Jerusalem, whether she worships Jesus. She replies, "It sometimes seems to me that I ought, for I am of his race, and you should sympathise with your race." He then asks her whether she has read the Gospels, which, of course, she has, the Anglican bishop in Jerusalem having given her a copy. Moreover, she declares it a good book, "written, I observe, entirely by Jews. I find in it many things with which I agree; and if there be some from which I dissent, it may be that I do not comprehend them." Excitedly Tancred tells her that she is already "half a Christian!"²⁸ Later in the novel, in explaining the history of revelation to a Muslim emir, Tancred tells him that through Jesus, the last and greatest of Israel's princes, the Hebrew mind came to mold and govern the world. He concludes his explanation with the arresting but simple-minded formula, "Christianity is Judaism for the multitude, but still it is Judaism."²⁹

Disraeli also collapses differences between Jews and Arabs. He assigns the children of Israel origins in the Arabian desert, refers to Judaism and

Christianity as “Arabian creeds”—Tancred, for example, describes himself as “an Arab only in religion”—and defines the Arabs, in one of his most memorable phrases, as “only Jews upon horseback.” Among the desert tribes that Tancred encounters in his adventures are the Rechabites, Hebrew-speaking Arabs who follow the laws of Moses. Furthermore, in the Middle East of Disraeli’s imagination, Jews and Arabs live in harmony and on close terms with each other. In one case, an orphan Arab prince grows to manhood in the home of a wealthy Jerusalem merchant.³⁰

Were a novelist to take such liberties today, we might assume that his intention was to promote interfaith understanding or Arab-Israeli goodwill. But clearly these were not Disraeli’s aims. His desire to minimize the gap between Judaism and Christianity may have owed something to his status as a convert, for by insisting that there was very little difference between the two religions he perhaps hoped to reassure himself that his own change of faith was not an act of apostasy. This explanation, of course, assumes that Disraeli felt some regret, unease, or guilt about his conversion—a matter of pure conjecture. We are on sounder ground, however, if we see this levelling tendency in the context of his racial doctrines. For Disraeli, “All is race; there is no other truth,” to cite Sidonia’s famous epigram.³¹ If so, the initial common ethnicity of Jews and Arabs in the Middle East becomes more important than later developments that set them apart; similarly, the racial origins of the founders of Christianity assume greater significance than subsequent historical and theological differences. Disraeli, having staked his claim to admission to the Tory elite on the basis of his racial nobility, thus upheld the pre-eminence of race over other factors, such as class and religion, in the development of human history.

Arendt’s observations about the character of Disraeli’s Jewishness appeared in the context of a much broader study, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, and do not constitute a sustained analysis of his Jewish problem. Others have since pursued the same line of inquiry—in some cases, apparently, unaware of her interpretation³²—and have broadened our understanding of how Disraeli manipulated his Jewish origins to his political and social advantage. The most brilliant of these accounts is Isaiah Berlin’s presidential address to the Jewish Historical Society of England in 1967. With his customary eloquence, Berlin discusses at length how Disraeli overcame a serious obstacle to his career—his Jewish birth—by inflating it into a claim to noble birth. “He needed to do this in order to feel that he was dealing on equal terms with the leaders of his family’s adopted country, which he so profoundly venerated.”³³ Unlike Arendt, however, Berlin emphasizes the psychological dimension to Disraeli’s adoption of a new persona. Whereas she felt that “the potent wizard never took himself quite seriously and always played a role to win society and to find popularity,”³⁴ Berlin treats Disraeli’s Jewish chauvin-

ism less as a species of playful charlatanism than as a profound response to his status as an outsider, alien to both Jewish and Christian society.

In Berlin's view, the young Disraeli, in searching for his place in a very hierarchical Victorian society, unconsciously constructed a new persona, "an inner image of himself with which he could establish for himself a place in the world, and play a part in history and society." Only through this "decisive act of psychological self-transformation" was he able to function in the highly class-conscious world whose prime minister he eventually became.³⁵ This Disraeli, rather than Arendt's, is the more human figure. Despite his exoticism, we can sympathize with his plight.

Yet, however insightful Berlin's essay, it leaves unanswered one fundamental question: why did Disraeli play down his ancestry when he first launched himself into society and politics and then later, in the 1840s, reassert it in such an emphatic way? Abraham Gilam has taken up this problem in a number of recent articles, in which, by placing Disraeli's embrace of Jewishness against the background of his political career, he has arrived at the most satisfactory answer we now have.³⁶ Gilam points out that when Disraeli first attempted to penetrate fashionable society he did so in the garb of a dandy, resplendent in gorgeous waistcoats, velvet suits, gold chains, his hair in ringlets, lace at his wrists. Other parvenus before him, such as Beau Nash and Beau Brummel, had risen to prominence on the basis of their wit, charm, and originality in dress and manners. Disraeli, too, pursued this strategy with considerable success, but in the early 1840s he must have realized that dandyism could only take him so far, for unlike other men of obscure origins he had an additional burden. His Jewish ancestry was hardly a secret: his very name proclaimed it. His political enemies exploited this weakness, and as he became a conspicuous figure in politics, he became more exposed and vulnerable to their taunts. Obscuring his background would have been useless, so, Gilam concludes, he magnified it. "Disraeli felt it necessary to express a definite attitude to his own Jewish ancestry and to prevent his foes from defining it for him."³⁷

For Gilam, the newly Jewish Disraeli that emerged in the 1840s was "the product of a carefully calculated strategy,"³⁸ rather than, as Berlin suggests, the outcome of a personal search for identity. Here, I believe, Berlin has a more profound grasp of Disraeli the man than Gilam. To be sure, Disraeli was an astute politician; he was no stranger to dissimulation and all the other tricks of the trade. But in his espousal of the Jews there was too much passion and fanaticism for it to be merely a political strategy. Politics alone do not explain his obsession with Jews. When writing of them, Berlin reminds us, he always went too far, harping on their power, exaggerating their importance, introducing them gratuitously into his novels. The political dilemma in which he found himself in the early 1840s undoubtedly acted as a catalyst in the formation of his

new outlook, and by emphasizing this point, Gilam satisfactorily explains the timing of his espousal of his Jewishness. Disraeli's Jewish fantasies, however, had deeper psychological roots; his novels make this clear. As Berlin remarks, "A man may not be sincere in his political speeches or his letters, but his works of art are himself and tell one where his true values lie."³⁹ This was certainly true for Disraeli, who poured his heart into his fiction and was unable to distance himself from the Jewish characters he created. As he said of his novels *Contarini Fleming*, *Alroy* and *Tancred*, "This Trilogy is the secret history of my feelings."⁴⁰

One further influence on the genesis of Disraeli's Jewish self remains to be discussed: his visit to the Holy Land in 1831. At age twenty-five, with two wealthy, equally young companions, Disraeli made a sixteen-month tour of the Mediterranean and the Near East, including a week in Jerusalem. The impact of this experience is not easy to assess, in part because more than a decade elapsed between his stay there and his public embrace of his Jewish ancestry and, in part, because he wrote relatively little in his letters home about his experiences in the Holy City. Because Gilam emphasizes the political context of the 1840s in forging Disraeli's Jewish outlook and, at the same time, is also insensitive to the psychological dimensions of this self-transformation, he attributes no importance to this youthful adventure. Gilam notes that in his letters to his sister Sarah "Disraeli hardly expressed deep feelings of attachment beyond mere traveller's excitement about Jerusalem."⁴¹ He displayed little interest in shrines sacred to Jewish history, nor did he comment on the condition of the Jewish community. In fact, there is no evidence that he even met with any Jews during his stay.

Were we to read no further than the letters Disraeli sent home, we would probably agree with Gilam that Jerusalem had little impact on his sense of attachment to the Jewish people. But we need not limit ourselves to this body of evidence. Disraeli's fiction, which was all more or less autobiographical, suggests a very different conclusion. In the trilogy he described as "the secret history of my feelings," he returned to Jerusalem again and again, incorporating almost verbatim long descriptive passages from his correspondence and transforming bits and pieces of his own experience into those of his protagonists. In a recent book on Disraeli's grand tour, his distinguished biographer Robert Blake argues this point, making full use of the novels into which Disraeli put so much of himself. Contra Gilam, Blake claims that, in general, Disraeli's journey was one of the formative experiences of his career and, in particular, that the stay in Jerusalem "left the greatest and most lasting impression upon him" of all the places he visited. There was kindled "his intense interest in what he called 'the race,'" and there he eventually found the identity he was seeking.⁴² Unfortunately, Blake does not attempt to explain why more than a decade lapsed between the Jerusalem visit and the appearance of his views on Jewish matters.⁴³

The passage of a decade between Disraeli's grand tour and his embrace of Jewish chauvinism does not in itself, however, disprove a connection between the two events. The consequences of formative experiences often work themselves out many years later, bursting into conscious expression when stimulated by changes in a person's inner life or in his external circumstances. In Disraeli's case, it may have been the state of his political career in the early 1840s that stimulated him to rethink who he was. At that time feelings long dormant beneath the surface of conscious thought may have reasserted themselves. Yet, whatever the impact of the Jerusalem experience, we can be certain that it did not make him a Jew in any conventional sense of the term. His feelings of kinship with the Jewish people and his pride in their accomplishments did not bring him any closer to the Jewish community of his age. In matters of faith, moreover, he remained a Christian at all times, continuing to believe in the spiritual insufficiency of Judaism, looking forward to the day when his former coreligionists would join him as members of the Christian community.

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NOTES

1. Benjamin Jaffe, "A Reassessment of Benjamin Disraeli's Jewish Aspects," *Transactions of the Jewish Historical Society of England*, Vol. 27 (1978-80), p. 116.

2. Isaiah Berlin, "Benjamin Disraeli, Karl Marx and the Search for Identity," in *Against the Current: Essays in the History of Ideas*, ed. Henry Hardy (London, 1979), pp. 261-2. This article appeared initially in *Transactions of the Jewish Historical Society of England*, Vol. 22 (1968-69), pp. 1-20, and in *Midstream*, Vol. 16, no. 7 (August-September 1970), pp. 24-49. The citations below are to the reprinting in *Against the Current*.

3. See, for example, the entry on the Talmud in his *Curiosities of Literature*, of which there are over a dozen editions, and his *Genius of Judaism*, which he published anonymously in 1833.

4. Quoted in Jaffe, "Reassessment," p. 116.

5. *The Wonderful Tale of Alroy*, pt. 6, chap. 3.

6. Abraham Gilam, *The Emancipation of the Jews in England, 1830-1860* (New York, 1982), appendix ("Benjamin Disraeli and the Emancipation of the Jews"), pp. 155-158; idem, "Disraeli in Jewish Historiography," *Midstream*, Vol. 26, no. 3 (March 1980), p. 27.

7. Benjamin Disraeli to Sarah Disraeli, 5 December 1837, *Benjamin Disraeli Letters*, ed. J. A. W. Gunn et al (Toronto, 1982-), Vol. 2, pp. 323-4.

8. Richard Davis, *The English Rothschilds* (Chapel Hill, 1983), pp. 88-9.

9. It is commonly believed that Disraeli took Lionel de Rothschild (1808-79) as his model for Sidonia. In his recent book on the English Rothschilds, Richard Davis expresses scepticism about this claim. He points out that the head of the bank and the young politician were not intimate at the time the book was written

and that Lionel's personality bore little resemblance to the fictional banker Sidonia. He does add, however: "There can be little doubt that the fabulous financier with his mysterious international connections was Rothschild-inspired (though not by any particular Rothschild). That is as far as one can safely go." p. 87.

10. *Coningsby*, bk. 4, chap. 10.
11. *Ibid.*, bk. 4, chap. 15.
12. *Ibid.*
13. *Tancred*, bk. 4, chap. 4.
14. *Ibid.*, bk. 3, chap. 4.
15. Quoted in Robert Blake, *Disraeli* (Garden City, 1968), p. 248.
16. *Lord George Bentinck: A Political Biography* (London, 1852²), pp. 491-2.
17. Jaffe, "Reassessment," p. 117.
18. *Tancred*, bk. 5, chap. 5.
19. *Bentinck*, pp. 498-9, 505-7.
20. *Tancred*, bk. 5, chap. 6.
21. Jaffe, "Reassessment," p. 117.
22. M. C. N. Salbstein, *The Emancipation of the Jews in Britain: The Question of the Admission of the Jews to Parliament, 1828-1860* (Rutherford [NJ], 1982), chap. 5 ("Benjamin Disraeli, Marrano Englishman").
23. In general, Salbstein's treatment of the *converso* phenomenon and the Sephardi diaspora does not inspire confidence, as, for example, when he refers to Disraeli as "a Sephard [sic] of the Marrano type," p. 107.
24. Hannah Arendt, *Antisemitism*, part 1 of *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York, 1968), pp. 72-75.
25. *Tancred*, bk. 4, chap. 3.
26. *Coningsby*, bk. 7, chap. 1.
27. Constance de R. Flower, Lady Battersea, to Cyril Flower, Lord Battersea, 20 April 1881, Battersea Papers, Add. MS 47,910/5, British Library, London.
28. *Tancred*, bk. 3, chap. 4.
29. *Ibid.*, bk. 6, chap. 4.
30. *Ibid.*, bk. 3, chaps. 6 and 7; bk. 4, chaps. 3 and 9. Interestingly, Heinrich Heine, another convert who remained obsessed with his Jewish origins long after his baptism, also used the terms "Arab" and "Jew" interchangeably. See the many examples cited in S. S. Praver, *Heine's Jewish Comedy: A Study of His Portraits of Jews and Judaism* (Oxford, 1983).
31. *Ibid.*, bk. 2, chap. 14.
32. Neither Berlin nor Blake cite Arendt.
33. Berlin, "Disraeli, Marx and the Search for Identity," p. 268.
34. Arendt, *Antisemitism*, p. 75.
35. Berlin, "Disraeli, Marx and the Search for Identity," p. 270.
36. Gilam, "Disraeli in Jewish Historiography," *Emancipation of the Jews in England*; "Benjamin Disraeli and Jewish Identity," *The Wiener Library Bulletin*, n.s., Vol. 33, no. 51/52 (1980), pp. 2-8.
37. Gilam, "Disraeli and Jewish Identity," p. 7.
38. *Ibid.*
39. Berlin, "Disraeli, Marx and the Search for Identity," p. 264.
40. "The Mutilated Diary," *Benjamin Disraeli Letters*, Vol. 1, p. 447. I am grateful

to my colleague Alvin Rosenfeld for helping me think through this point, although I am not sure that he would agree with my conclusion.

41. Gilam, "Disraeli and Jewish Identity," p. 8, n. 6.

42. Robert Blake, *Disraeli's Grand Tour: Benjamin Disraeli and the Holy Land, 1830-31* (New York, 1982), p. 106.

43. It could be argued that Disraeli first introduced Jewish themes into his work with *Alroy*, which he began writing before setting out for the Near East. However, although the subject of *Alroy* is nominally Jewish messianism, Disraeli does not express in this fabulous tale views about Jewish matters that were later characteristic of his thinking.

